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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: PRESS CRITICISM OF FM BRIZ COULD HURT

[11](#). (SBU) Summary: Signaling the end of the honeymoon for at least one member of the Berger Administration, a major national daily has attacked the performance of Jorge Briz Abularach's Foreign Ministry. While the motives for the attack are still unclear, Briz confided to the Ambassador he is sensitive to the criticism. Briz's political sensitivity could indirectly affect U.S. interests. End Summary.

[12](#). (SBU) Leading daily "Prensa Libre," the most influential newspaper in Guatemala, is widely viewed as a partisan mouthpiece for elite economic interests, and was solidly pro-Berger and anti-FRG throughout the election campaign in [12003](#). Until now it has refrained from direct attacks on the performance of the new government, while featuring alleged corruption by the previous government involving other opposition parties.

[13](#). (U) However, on April 19, "Prensa Libre" featured a lead editorial entitled "A Do-nothing Foreign Ministry." The editorial criticized the performance of the MFA under Foreign Minister Briz, and Briz himself for his lack of diplomatic experience, mastery of the English language and the foreign policy issues he now confronts. It cites unnamed government officials and diplomats as saying "international relations are totally blocked and nothing is happening in the Foreign Ministry, and blaming Briz." The editorial ascribes to Briz a "Cold War geo-strategic world view," and a marked preference for naming Ambassadors from business backgrounds rather than those with "more progressive views." It accuses him of ceding ground to the Economy Ministry on trade, to Rigoberta Menchu on the Peace Accords, and to Vice President Stein on relations with the U.S. Stein's solo visit to Washington to prepare for the Berger visit is cited a proof of Briz's marginalization. By the author's reckoning, Briz's uncertainty and indecision have resulted in a paralyzed MFA. The editorial ends by contrasting Briz's "ideological and pro-business" vision with VP Stein's emphasis on social inclusion. On April 20, influential "El Periodico" columnist Jorge Palmieri also mounted an attack on Briz, citing the VP's leading role in foreign policy among other examples of the FM's marginalization. Those included Berger's call for reform of the Central American Parliament, and Stein's public pronouncement in favor of the OAS SecGen candidacy of Miguel Angel Rodriguez, neither of which were cleared with Briz.

Comment

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[14](#). (SBU) Briz, as a Presidential aspirant with a background in business, not diplomacy, is vulnerable to this kind of sniping. Since the outset of his tenure as Foreign Minister we have noted Briz's sensitivity to criticism or perceived slights. However, Briz has been willing to take political risks at our request (e.g., on Cuba resolutions in Geneva and on Article 98).

[15](#). (SBU) The motives for the "Prensa Libre" editorial are still a subject of speculation. We do not believe it comes from Stein, although he has dissented from the Briz-Berger position on Cuba and has not been enthusiastic about Article [198](#). It also strikes us as rather early for Briz's fellow presidential aspirants in the Berger government to launch such an attack against him. Skinner-Klee has speculated that the attack may have come from within the Foreign Ministry, either from high-ranking MFA staff replaced by Briz or from rival aspirants for the Foreign Ministry job.

[16](#). (SBU) Comment, continued. Regardless of the motive, the editorial attacks on Briz have undermined his confidence and willingness to risk exposure on issues that are controversial in Guatemala, including accession to an Article 98 agreement with the U.S.

WHARTON